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SUBJECT: INDIAN EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER VISITS BANGLADESH

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 d.

1. (C) Summary: BDG and Indian High Commission contacts describe Indian Foreign Minister Singh's visit as a positive resumption of dialogue, though little if any progress was made on key issues. The Bangladeshi focus is now on the upcoming visits of the Indian water resources and commerce ministers, and the SAARC summit in November. End Summary.

2, (SBU) Local media hailed the August 6-8 visit to Dhaka of Indian External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh, the first by a minister of the UPA government, as a goodwill visit signaling a thaw in Indo-Bangladeshi relations. Singh's meetings included Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Foreign Minister Morshed Khan, Finance Minister Saifur Rahman, opposition Awami League president Sheikh Hasina, and prominent constitutional lawyer/oppositionist Kamal Hossain.

3. (SBU) Khan told the media that their "fruitful" talks covered trade, water sharing, border management, UN reform, cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, extradition agreements, and the Burma-Bangladesh-India gas pipeline. He called for rapid implementation of the 1975 border guidelines, expressed concern over India's border fences, urged the removal of trade barriers for Bangladeshi goods, stressed the need for India to develop land ports to facilitate movement of Bangladeshi products, welcomed continued Indian investment, expressed concern over India's inter-river linking project, and repeated that no terrorist group operates from Bangladesh. Singh emphasized GOI concerns over Bangladeshi illegal immigrants, pressed for an extradition treaty, stated support for a bilateral free trade agreement, agreed to exchange information about floods and weather, and solicited Bangladeshi support for a seat on the UN Security Council.

4. (SBU) In addition, BDG and GOI officials expressed hope and plans for future discussions on increased bus service between India and Bangladesh, increased scholarships for Bangladeshis at Indian schools, increased visas for Indians to Bangladesh (Note: the Indians here issue over 1,000 NIVs each day), future discussions on the Burma-Bangladesh-Indian pipeline, Bangladesh's access to Nepal through India, and the import of power from Bhutan. They also announced that Indian Water Minister Priyaranjan Das Munshi will come to Bangladesh later this month to discuss water issues.

5. (SBU) On August 7, Singh addressed a seminar on "Indo-Bangladesh Dialogue on Trade, Investment, and Connectivity." He emphasized the need for both India and Bangladesh to counter the common threats of terrorism and religious fundamentalism, and advocated increased bilateral trade as a way to boost prosperity and good neighborly relations. Khan downplayed any bilateral differences, saying nothing is beyond resolution as long dialogue is open.

6. (C) On August 4, looking ahead to the visit, PMO Foreign Affairs Advisor Reaz Rahman characterized Singh's visit to Charge as an effort to lift the two countries out of their "doldrums," which he attributed more to circumstance than the design of either side. He affirmed the BDG's determination to move the relationship forward and address the GOI's five areas of concern: Indian militants allegedly using Bangladesh as a sanctuary, illegal migration, the alleged use of Bangladesh as a launching pad for militant attacks in northeastern India, communalism, and the BDG's alleged reluctance to promote bilateral trade. He identified BDG issues as water, India's USD 1 billion trade balance with Bangladesh, negative Indian media reporting on Bangladesh, and transit rights to Nepal. "Let's move ahead where we can, and talk about the rest," he said.

7. (C) Asked about the status of ULFA leader Anup Chetia, who remains in detention in Dhaka despite the end of his sentence for various immigration offenses, Rahman said, "The only reason we keep Chetia is our sense of sovereignty and Indian bullying. We never got any credit for sealing our border during the Indian operation against ULFA in Bhutan." He expressed the hope that coordinated border security would lead to joint patrols and "a new spirit of trust." He insisted that the last thing any BDG would want to do is to help a militant group dedicated to evicting Bengalis and other non-Assamese from Assam.

18. (C) On August 9, Home Minister of State Babar told Charge the Singh visit went well but offered no details. Addressing a think tank seminar later that day, Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin cautiously welcomed Singh's visit as "a positive confidence building measure" and went on to reiterate BDG concerns about various Indian actions and proposals, including a South Asia Free Trade Agreement.

19. (C) Senior Indian High Commission officials were cautiously upbeat to us about the visit, but noted there had been no movement on issues of concern. They complained that the BDG denies any knowledge of ULFA leaders in Bangladesh except for Chetia, although they have humint and "signals" indicating otherwise. They confirmed that India is committed to attending the SAARC summit November 12-13, and that Natwar Singh would return to Dhaka for the preceding ministerials.

110. (C) Comment: The BDG is trying to take the high road with India, at least publicly, and leave behind its bitterness over the postponement of the SAARC summit earlier this year and other perceived GOI slights. Still, it is notable that BDG officials talk about the need for CBM's to build a new spirit of bilateral trust, a sign of just how bad they think the relationship sank. Now, the Bangladeshi focus is on the August 29 visit of the Indian water resources minister, who will co-chair the first meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission since 2003.

CHAMMAS